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RAMDAS: THE PATRIOT SAINT AND SHIVAJI

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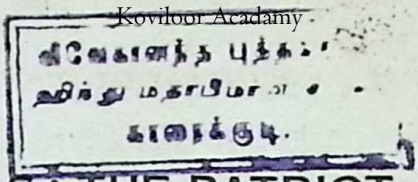
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RAMDAS: THE PATRIOT SAINT AND SHIVAJI

The Moghal Power was at its zenith. Hindus were crushed beneath the burden of taxes and groaning under tyranny and persecution. To the sturdy Rajputs ever famous for their valour and independence, resistance had grown wearisome. It was at this critical time that Shivaji founded and consolidated the Mahratta kingdom. The uprush of the Mahratta Power was startling in its suddenness and it was aided by a religious movement as tolerant as it was fervid. Among the many teachers that stimulated the religious fervour of the people, there was one whom Shivaji most adored, to whose ennobling influence he owed all that was best in him and at whose feet he once laid down his kingship as an offering. That remarkable teacher was Ramdas.

In a village called Jambava, on the banks of the sacred Godavery, there lived during the latter part of the 16th century, a pious Brahmana known as Suryaji Panth. For a long time he was blessed with no son. When Suryaji and his dutiful wife, Ranubai, were performing *yajna* on an auspicious occasion, Ranubai had a dream that she would have two sons, and so it was.

The younger of the two was named Narayana. Young Narayana was invested with the sacred thread in his 5th year and began to learn. Gifted with a rich and retentive memory, he mastered the Vedas in a very short time. When he was but six, Suryaji, his father, died and like that of many Indian lads, Narayan's promising career was chequered from the very

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earliest part of it by household duties. But the mental endowments of the boy were fully commensurate with the responsibilities which devolved upon him. Whenever he could get some leisure, he would steal away to the banks of the Godavery, or under a solitary banyan tree a little way off the village. There, in the wintry mornings and the sunny afternoons, resting his cheek on the palm of his hand, he would repose in recumbent posture absorbed in thought for hours and hours gazing on the blue sky or the limpid waters of the stream. Unmindful of hunger, sleep and thirst, he would there try to solve problems too hard and complicated even for elderly pandits of mature learning.

The First Plunge

Ranubai and her elder son, often annoyed beyond endurance at Narayan's absence from home and weary of search, treated him harshly, scolding and slapping him on his return home—not an unusual occurrence with ignorant elders who are called upon to deal with such great ones. But the habit grew with the boy, and on one occasion he was so lost in thought in the forest of Panchavati that Ranubai and her elder son almost despaired of finding him. After a full day's search, however, the missing boy was discovered, deeply absorbed in thought.

As at other times, so at this, he was thinking about his Motherland. The outlook everywhere seemed gloomy. Brutal armies of a bigoted ruler swept the country like demons of destruction wrecking the wonderful monuments of ancient architecture containing the sacred images of worship, and shedding the blood of innocent men, women and children. Narayan's heart melted at the sight of the poverty, misery and persecution which enveloped the Motherland. He desired to dispel the gloom, to make the country free and prosperous, to re-establish Rama Rajya. To attain this end he decided for

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himself that he must lead a life of poverty and self-sacrifice. He must endure every hardship to secure the good of his country. There was no other way. With a resoluteness which no consideration would shake, he therefore chose to become an ascetic. He delighted in evolving fanciful plans to elevate his fallen countrymen, and found exhilarating joy in love and sacrifice to the country.

When his brother traced him out on this occasion, he was much puzzled with the change that had come over him. Narayan was no longer the same melancholy lad. There was a divine brightness beaming on his face. His unusual buoyancy of spirit and cheerful countenance perplexed his brother and when he was trying to account for it, Narayan spoke as follows : "Pray, brother, let me become a Sannyasi. I must travel abroad to elevate our country, and to restore the sacred religion of our forefathers. Our country is afflicted with cruelty and misery and I feel bound to devote my life to her service. I will consecrate my life to obey, and to make others obey, the call of duty."

Marriage or Suicide?

His brother seemingly assented to this proposal in order to take him home. There everything was done to discourage Narayan in his noble choice, but nothing succeeded. Only one course now seemed to be left for his baffled brother and mother, *viz.*, to wed Narayan to a fair girl, so that in her company he might not think of becoming a Sannyasi.

This intention on their part upset the boy. He became irritable, morose and obstinate. His teacher also joined his brother and mother in pressing him to marry. Once again he was missed from home, and after the usual long search, his brother, standing by a peepal tree on the bank of a pond, no far from his house, shouted his name aloud. There was an answer from among the branches overhead, and ere he could discern whose voice it was, a human figure dropped into the

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still waters beneath and sank. When the struggling lad was rescued from what was feared to be a watery grave, he was found to be Narayan.

Caught in a Trap

After this shocking incident not a whisper was heard about his marriage and once again he was the same gentle and dutiful son that he had ever been. But the grief of his mother was unendurable. On a certain evening she asked her son :

" Narayan, what do you mean by the words you repeat : ' worship the mother ' when you recite the sacred Vedas ?" ; to which he readily replied : " I mean that I must adore my mother even as a Goddess, must strive in thought, word and deed to alleviate her suffering, to support her, and to make her happy. But the learned declared that a dutiful son must feel alike both for his mother and his Motherland. He who serves his mortal mother, but not his Motherland is no true son of either, but fails alike to both. One must sacrifice all personal interests and toil restlessly for the good of both, enduring every hardship and facing every danger. This is Vedic injunction and this all the Shastras proclaim."

" Well then, dear child, you regard me as a Goddess : you must obey my word ; must you not ?" asked Ranubai.

" Certainly I must and I will : why doubt that, my most revered mother ? Do but speak your wish and it shall be obeyed even as are the commands of the Vedas," answered the unsuspecting son.

" Marry, then, my good son ", spoke the mother, delighted with the promise of obedience.

As Bridegroom

Candid Narayan was taken at this word and trapped. The conflict was keen. The call of duty to the Motherland was imperious and so was the wish of his mother. His

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promise was irrevocable. The loving, solicitous mother lost no time in hastening the celebration of his marriage. Friends and relatives assembled to witness the holy rites. Seated by the chosen bride, Narayan was serene and firm, looking to Providence for deliverance. When, before beginning the rites proper, the officiating priest took the sanctified water in silver spoon, the bridegroom in the act of receiving it exclaimed "Savadhana"—literally "with caution" or "attention" and ran off quickly beyond the reach of his discomfited and perplexed pursuers.* He had consecrated his life to the service of his country and, abandoning all wordly pleasures and comforts, chose cheerfully to endure all toil and hardship that he might elevate and bless the suffering millions. He became an ascetic, not the ascetic we now see with nothing of asceticism in him but the garb; but a true Sannyasi.

Long Wanderings

From the marriage pandal to Nasik as a runaway bridegroom, from Nasik to other parts as Ramdas, a name he newly adopted, for twelve long years he travelled, toiling incessantly to acquire a knowledge of the country at the time. Now in a village, now in a town, observing the administration, and interviewing the chiefs to mark the bent of their mind, occasionally on the heights of far-off Himalayas, the abode of spirituality, as well as snow, to draw inspiration from Divine Wisdom, as well as from the marvellous beauty and magnificent grandeur of Nature, he acquired a fund of knowledge which opened to him the mystery of life here and hereafter.

Many were the miracles that occurred during these wanderings. When Ramdas had been to Rameshwaram, it is said that he was taken by Maruthi across the straights to see Lanka.

* There is another version of this incident, according to which the word "Savadhana" was uttered by the priest, and the bridegroom ook it as the heaven-sent signal to free himself.

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All this time he was a devout worshipper of Sri Rama ; but his vision was soon broadened at Pandarpur, which he had avoided from his tours because Krishna was worshipped. A Brahmin however influenced him to go on the plea that Maruthi was also honoured there ; and when he reached Pandarpur, Maruthi appeared to him in a dream and told him that Rama and Krishna are one and the same, the incarnations of the same Vishnu.

Ramdas now took to teaching and writing. It is said that *Dasabodha*, his famous work, was composed at this time, 12 years after he ran away from home. His gentle loving disposition won for him many followers, and the pure and unselfish life he lived, inspired the millions with deep devotion. Throughout the length and breadth of Maharashtra, his name became a household word, and his words were highly esteemed by the cultured and the ignorant alike, for all felt that in him they had their best friend and Guru.

Contact With Shivaji

It was in the year 1659 that Shivaji sought Ramdas, impelled by the words of a religious lecturer ; who in narrating the story of Dhruva laid stress on the necessity of a worthy Guru for the aspirants after Divine wisdom. And what Narada was to Dhruva, that Ramdas became to Shivaji.

For a long time Shivaji sought him in vain. Ramdas seemed to take a pleasure in avoiding him. When the king almost despaired of attaining his ambition, the Saint sent him a letter which not only pleased Shivaji but encouraged him in his mission.

After recounting his noble and heroic qualities, the letter read :

" The holy places were broken. The abodes of Brahmans were polluted. All earth was shaken. Religion had fled. At such a time, Narayan (God) resolved to protect the gods of the faith, the cows and Brahmans, and inspired thee to do so."

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This letter further increased the king's desire to meet Ramdas in person and so he again started in search. He went to Chaphal, the usual residence of the Saint where he had built a temple to Sri Rama : but Ramdas was away. When, however he took a vow not to take any food before meeting the Saint, Ramdas was soon seen sitting below a tree writing a letter. But all the king's entreaties proved useless to bring him to his camp. Then Shivaji gave him a large sum of money which was immediately distributed among the poor.

The Strange Gift

When the king left, the teacher made him the parting gift of a cocoanut, some water, some earth, a few pebbles and some horse-dung. When Shivaji took them to his mother Jijibai, she treated them with scorn ; but the king knew better. He revered them as tokens of the coming greatness. The earth and water meant a kingdom. Pebbles meant that Shivaji's strength would lie in forts and his army was to be of horse-men.

Profoundly devoted to his Guru, Shivaji regarded his word as gospel. His teaching was simple and beautiful and most suited to the needs of his time. Ramdas urged that unselfish devotion to duty is the highest virtue and that alone secures heavenly bliss. He who flinches from, or neglects duty is a great sinner and a traitor to his country and religion alike. Shivaji, inspired by such teachings, concluded that it was obligatory on the part of every mortal to protect his country and religion. He is said to have spoken once to his Guru in the following strain :

" My lord, you have not yet shown me, your humble pupil, that I merit your commands. I crave your sanction to serve you. The welfare of our country ever lies in the hands of true Brahmanas. So long as they remain fallen, there is no hope of elevating the rest. They are the very foundation on which rests the Hindu society. How can we hope to build

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the stately edifice of good society on a weak foundation ? Our future prospects depend upon their sound learning and teaching. Second to no race in the world in intellect, could they but co-operate with the other three varnas, they would be invincible and our future would be assured."

"Therefore, my son," replied Ramdas, "look first to their support and education and reward merit in them. Now they have greatly degenerated. They ape the manners of their rulers. Nothing is more contemptible than that the Hindus should adopt the ways of the Mussalmans. Ever remember that you are a Hindu and do your best to foster love of country and religion."

With Tukaram

Though deeply attached to Ramdas, Shivaji revered all holy men and when he found that he could not get Ramdas to be near him, he tried to induce Tukaram to come and stay in his camp, to be his constant guide ; but Tukaram too refused the offer and the escort that went to fetch him brought in reply a beautiful letter which concluded :

"There is no happiness like a beggar's. Austerity and renunciation are the greatest of possessions. Wealthy men whose desires entangle them are miserable. Tukaram says that you are rich and honoured ; but the followers of Hari are more fortunate."

On receiving this letter Shivaji left his camp and actually joined Tukaram, becoming for the time a religious devotee. From this state he was saved by his mother Jijibai. She forced Tukaram by her entreaties to send her son back to the world, on which he was ever so ready to turn his back.

When Shivaji returned to his camp and his kingly duties he did not lose touch with Tukaram. He often attended religious discourses given by Tukaram and his taste for them once very nearly cost his life. Tukaram had at the king's

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request come to Poona and was reciting a Katha or sacred story in the temple. Some spy heard of this and told the enemies. A body of Afghans surrounded the temple and searched the audience. As the Afghans searched, a man, who in face and in clothes resembled Shivaji, ran through the door. The Afghans rushed after him but never caught him. He disappeared in the forests of Singhad. In the meantime Tukaram continued his sacred story. When it was over, Shivaji and the rest of the audience went home unmolested. The belief is still widespread that the man who led the Afghans from the temple was none other than Lord Krishna himself.

Kingdom Given Away !

This attachment to Tukaram was however only a passing phase ; for Shivaji was bound to Ramdas by far stronger ties. While Tukaram and all other saints of the period were only religious and preached resignation to their lot as subjects of a foreign ruler, Ramdas alone strove for the liberation of the land. He was as much of a patriot as a saint and, naturally, Shivaji felt greater strength in his support. And Ramdas, knowing what a brave and loyal general and statesman he had in Shivaji, used him to the full in achieving his own objective.

Here is an incident revealing the nature of the relationship between the two. In the course of his wanderings, Ramdas reached Satara, and standing at the threshold of a grahastha cried : " Jai Raghu-Pathi ? " by way of asking alms. Shivaji who just then happened to be in the next house, discerned his Guru's voice and had a deed of gift instantly drawn up, and after due hospitality, dropped into the begging bowl that document impressed with his seal.

" Strange alms this, my son, " exclaimed the Guru, fully well aware of what had been done, " to a hungry mortal who needs but a morsel of food ; what to do with the paper ? "

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The paper, when read, declared that Shivaji had given away to Ramdas, his all, kingdom, wealth and everything that was his.

Smiling at this act: "What would you do next?" asked the latter.

"Obey your will as one of your humble Sishyas," was the answer, without a shadow of hesitation.

"Could you with a strip of cloth on and a waist-band, collect alms from house to house?" asked again Ramdas.

"I will do anything at your blessed feet," rejoined the pupil, and then, wearing the garb of Sannyasi, Shivaji did actually beg alms, with Kamandala in hand. Struck with this courage of conviction, Ramdas ordered his pupil to go back to rule his kingdom.

"God forbid", exclaimed the latter, "that I should revoke my gift. That ill becomes a Kshatriya."

"It becomes a Kshatriya to rule his country and to maintain social order. The Kshatriya who abandons his duty is a sinner."

When every exhortation met with flat refusal from Shivaji he commanded: "Rule the country as my servant."

Shivaji was now compelled to resume his kingship, and ever afterwards the cloth of red ochre, the garment of the Sannyasi, was made the standard of the Maharashtra. Under that holy banner united the Mahrattas of all castes and Ashramas, Brahmanas or Sudras, students or hermits.

The Captive Damsel

All revered that holy banner alike, and Shivaji resumed his rule as an humble servant of his spiritual master, whose holy influence spread far and wide permeating the meanest servant of the State. In all the adventures of Shivaji and his

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followers it was the spiritual influence at work that helped to combine wisdom with enthusiasm and toleration with fervid faith, and it never suffered their physical courage to predominate over their judgment under the most tempting and provoking circumstances. How remarkable their self-control was may be understood from the following fact :

When Kalyan was captured and its ruler Mulan Ahmed made captive, Abaji Sondev, the victorious lieutenant, thought of presenting the fair daughter of the Muslim to Shivaji. When Shivaji, heard of it he summoned both Sondev and the fair captive before the court. Shivaji then spoke words characteristic of his genius. "Had my mother been so handsome as this sister," said he, "I too would have been born handsome. But he who aspires to spotless fame should never covet a woman who is not his. Did not even the mighty Ravana perish because of his lust of women? To a king, his subjects ought to be dear as his children, and the king who breaks that sacred bond, degenerates into a beast, and falls. Believe me, the Shastras proclaim that women must be respected, and it is not right to violate them."

The Muslim damsel was not only set free but received presents as from a Hindu father, and safely sent to her parents. Such was the self-control, such the purity of moral principles instilled by Ramdas into the minds of his countrymen. The glorious victories achieved by Shivaji and his comrades, the extraordinary deeds of daring performed by them, the marvellous strength and courage they exhibited, and the surprising excellence of their morals—all was, in great measure, due to the inspiration of their life, their religious teacher, their friend and counsellor, Ramdas.

The Rise and Fall

As his name itself indicates, he was an ardent worshipper of Sri Ramachandra, and frequently affirmed that no

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country could be regenerated unless her sons emulated the mighty Hanuman, in devotion, prudence, self-possession and self-sacrifice and unless the king was as upright and benevolent as Sri Rama. And his own life was so tuned. As long as there was life in him so long did he labour for his Motherland. Shivaji strictly followed his advice. And as long as it was followed by his survivors so long did the Mahratta kingdom prosper. Raja Sambaji, unlike his father, disregarded the precepts of this great teacher, and on his part, the latter was so shocked by the Prince's bad ways that he refused to receive him in his presence.

Just prior to his death, in a final attempt to bring him to the right path, Ramdas wrote to him :

" Never forget how Shivaji won his kingdom. If you call yourself a man, try to do better than even he did."

But all the advice was in vain and Sambaji paid dearly for ignoring it. Happily, the teachings of Ramdas had taken such deep roots in Maharashtra that in spite of Sambaji's fall, the great patriotic endeavour was sustained. Though not to the same extent, the Peshwas followed the ideals of Shivaji as shaped by Ramdas ; and the Mahratta power steadily gained the ascendency. As years passed on, however, a rot began. The worship of the Motherland ceased to receive the same attention ; and the persons in power began to think of their own aggrandizement rather than of the Motherland.

The Last Days

In 1681, the year after the death of Shivaji, and in his 73rd year, Ramdas left his mortal frame, worn out in absolutely unselfish toil for the good of humanity and the Motherland.

It was at Parali, at the residence built for him by Shivaji that the wise old Rajaguru felt his end approaching. His

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disciples felt it also and gave way to grief. Ramdas rebuked them for their tears and composed a few lines for them. Then he bade them read his poems and keep ever in their hearts the image of the god Ramachandra. A few moments later the dying saint called out 'Har! Har!' twenty-one times. He wispered the words 'Ram! Ram!' His eyes sought the god's image and a flame, so it seemed to the spectators, left his mouth and entered the lips of the image. His disciples called to him; he made no answer. His body was burned to the north of Parali upon a pyre of Bel and Tulsi wood. His ashes were gathered and taken to Chaphal. Afterwards Sambaji had them conveyed northwards and cast reverently into the Ganges.

His Secret of Triumph

The life of Ramdas was unique in many respects.

Though he lived as a Sannyasi and a religous reformer, his main aim was political, the freedom of the Motherland, and he devoted all his energies towards that end. And the result of this combination of religion and politics was excellent. One of his teachings was the insistence on Swadeshi, though that word was not then in use. He also hated the copying of foreign fashions and treated with contempt people who flattered the Moslem rulers by taking to such garb. His outlook was thus most comprehensive and the success was commensurate.

India had several such experiences in the past. The world owes Asoka, the greatest of Emperors, to the religious renaissance introduced by Buddha. Nanak and his successors produced a glorious Punjab under Ranjit Singh; and Bengal's lead in Indian politics was due in no small measure to the awakening caused by Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

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Viewed from this standpoint, the prospects before India to-day are most encouraging. For, to-day, religion is as much to the fore as politics; in fact, the two are in close association. In the words of Mr. Gokhale, national service is being placed on a spiritual basis; and to not a few of the leaders and workers, patriotism, the worship of the Motherland, has become an article of faith as in the days of Ramdas and Shivaji.

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